

The Case of the Atmore-Holman Brothers & the IFA

THE ATMORE-HOLMAN BROTHERS

Akto Bakl (s.n. Edward Ellis)
Bectemba (s.n. Anthony Paradise)
Frank X. (s.n. Frank Moore)
Gamba Vanni (s.n. Oscar Johnson)
Johnny Harris
Makou Salim (s.n. Lincoln Heard)
Mumina (s.n. Charles Beasley)
Sitting Bull (s.n. Grover McCorvey)
Tuba (s.n. Jessie Clancy)

Murder & repression in Alabama prisons

The state of Alabama views the case of the Atmore-Holman Brothers with such importance that State Attorney General William Baxley will personally prosecute the case. If convicted of the various charges against them, the Brothers could receive—added on to their current terms—sentences ranging from 20 years to death.

The charges against the 9 defendants stem from two separate incidents earlier this year. On January 18, in protest of a beating of IFA member Jesse Clancy by prison guards, a group of Atmore inmates took control of the segregation block. With two guards as hostages, the inmates demanded the opportunity to

present their grievances to the outside world and the news media.

ALABAMA'S ATTICAS

Prison and state officials responded quickly, and in a brutal attack a prisoner and a guard were killed and several other inmates injured. George Dobbins, identified by the warden as a leader of the protest, was reported killed by gunfire. But a later coroner's report "raised doubts."

According to the *Mobile Register*, the coroner concluded that Dobbins died of nine stab wounds in his head, which were so severe that he could not have lived more than a few minutes after receiving them. Similarly, according to

inmate witnesses, Dobbins was wounded badly from shotgun blasts when he was loaded into an ambulance to be driven to a hospital in Mobile, 60 miles away.

In light of this, and the coroner's report, inmates are charging that he was stabbed and killed between the time the ambulance left the prison and when it arrived at the hospital.

On March 12, another IFA member, Tommy Lee Dotson, died after being beaten by guards while handcuffed at Holman prison. Following his death, four inmates confined to the tier where the beating took place, were charges with the murder of a guard.

According to prison officials, the four inmates somehow passed a knife down the row of cells to Dotson who was then supposed to have wrestled free from four guards and stabbed one of them,

THE DEMANDS

This robbery was the final straw. The prisoners began to organize. They realized that most organizing efforts

had been destroyed in the past because too few prisoners were able to set down clearly what was wrong, and what needed changing. Thus, when an effort was made to organize, the prison authorities could break it by killing and or transferring the leaders. The first step, then, was to go around to all the prisoners, and ask them what they thought needed to be done, and to get them to talk about their needs. Out of these discussions, which were held in every part of the prison, came a list of 31 demands.

The organizing effort continued for about five months and the organizers thought that they needed about another two months to do what needed to be done. However, in May of 1972, the beating of Willie Spencer (Fly Red) touched off a major demonstration and the IFA was forced to act a little sooner than they would have preferred. After the organized protest against the beating, Matundi was singled out as the organizational leader within the prison and was ordered transferred.

However, at the request of the other prisoners, Matundi refused to allow himself to be transferred. The prisoners told the warden that they were not going to allow Matundi to be transferred and that as of that moment the prisoners weren't working any more until their demands were met.

STRIKE!

Atmore is the state's largest prison. It contains about 1200 of Alabama's 4000 prisoners. Although the state has a Black population of about 24 percent, the prison population is about 75 percent Black, and Atmore's Black population is even higher. When the strike began, 1100 of the 1200 inmates stood together in solidarity against the keepers of the institution. For four days, the prisoners refused to work, demanding that the warden implement their demands. He refused and on the fourth day closed the dining hall and told the prisoners that if they did not work, they would not eat. Two days passed, and although the inmates refused to work, the warden opened the dining hall. The inmates, understanding full well their strength, and refused to enter the dining hall, and

testify for the state as part of the deal.

PEOPLE'S SUPPORT POSTPONED FIRST TRIAL

The trial of the nine was set to begin in June but the prosecution, surprised at the carloads of supporters who were rolling into town for the trial, neatly postponed the beginning of the trial. At the last minute, the Attorney General announced that he couldn't make it to court that day and the trial judge conveniently decided that it was a good time for summer vacation. As a result, the trial was postponed until October and was put off again until November 4 and now is scheduled for February 10. Members of the IFA Defense Committee note that the importance of the trial is to take away the license of guards to kill activist inmates. Rumors became so widespread that the story finally broke in the establishment media, causing prison authorities to issue a denial. Defense Committee members say though that such a death list does exist, and that it contains the names of other IFA members.

The origins of the IFA

For many years, the brothers inside Atmore State Prison Farm did everything possible to contact the outside world in an effort to make the truth known about barbaric conditions inside the walls. In the Christmas of 1971, the prison warden took all \$800 from the prisoners' welfare fund and spent it on holly and mistletoe to decorate the prison offices and outside entrances. While their money was being stolen, the inmates had no drinking cups (old cans were used when they could be found), no utensils to eat with, and almost nothing that is needed for even the most basic living conditions. (For those of you who do not know, the prison welfare fund money comes from the prisoners, in various forms, and is supposed to be used for their needs, and controlled by them.)

all while still handcuffed. Inmates on the tier maintain that the elderly guard died of a heart attack while participating in the beating of Dotson. Witnesses who were in nearby cells also report having heard the warden say, "Go on and kill the nigger. This is one we won't have to worry about anymore."

VICTIMS FRAMED BY STATE
While 45 inmates were originally indicted for the two separate events, there have been no indictments relating to the deaths of Dobbins and Dotson. With the Attorney General presenting the state's case, the Atmore-Holman Brothers were originally assigned one public defender as "the boys" while in the courtroom. Recently, however, the IFA Defense Committee helped organize a legal committee of over a dozen lawyers to assist with the defense.

In addition, the trial is to be held in the isolated town of Brewton, which is near Atmore and Holman prisons and



is the county seat of the last county in the nation to free its slaves. In May the original 45 inmates from the two prisons were brought up on 80 different charges ranging from riot to first degree murder. The state, confronted with a lack of evidence, was forced to drop charges against all but the nine Atmore-Holman Brothers. It is rumored, however, that as in other cases, some of those who had their charges dropped have agreed, under enormous pressure and terror, to

continued to go without food. After two more days, the penal officials agreed to meet with the inmates, but the meeting came to nil. After the meeting twenty-six of the "leaders" of the strike, including Mafundi, were shipped off to other prisons and beaten brutally. But the remaining inmates held fast and refused to give in, continuing to press

their demands. The understanding and persistence of the inmates ran so deep that the prison officials had to transfer almost 300 prisoners in the end, in order to break the strike. IFA members maintain that if they had the two extra months they needed, if things had not jumped off sooner than they planned, then there would have been no way at all for the authorities to have with the situation except by complete surrender.

RACIAL SOLIDARITY— AT FIRST

One remarkable aspect of the strike was the solidarity between Black and white inmates. Wherever poor and oppressed people organize, the oppressors try every possible tactic in an effort to split forces, to break the solidarity against them, with racism and, of course, other devices. Nowhere is this more obvious than in prisons where the prison authorities do everything they possibly can to keep Black and white inmates fighting. This fact was clear to the IFA, and by discussing this issue, and helping the white inmates realize that it was to their advantage to join the IFA, a strong move was made to prevent this split from again destroying an organizing effort.

Initially, the white inmates stood firm. During one set of early speeches on the yard, Black prisoners were the ones who took the lead in speaking out, and the racist guards called down from their gun towers and asked the white prisoners if they were going to let the "niggers" speak for them. The white prisoners said no, and one by one they

took their turn to speak—stating loud and clear their solidarity with the strike and their Black fellow inmates.

Once conditions returned to "normal," after the strike, the prison authorities made it clear to the white inmates who controlled the drug market in the prison, that if the IFA succeeded in its organizing efforts, that they (the IFA) would try to cut off the supply of drugs. The white thugs then



-Origins of IFA

went to the white inmates who were participating in the IFA and threatened their lives. One by one, the white inmates resigned, and as each one did they made it clear that they understood and believed in the goals of the IFA but felt that they would either be killed or have to kill to remain—and they weren't yet ready to deal with this.

Now, the IFA is almost entirely Black. All the IFA members listed on the death list are Black, all 45 originally indicted by the state are Black, Dobbins and Doston, the two assassinated leaders, were Black, and the nine Atmore-Holman Brother are Black. Nonetheless, most of the IFA members believe that racial solidarity is necessary. They hope that the white inmates will come to understand this, and overcome their fears, and join the IFA.

For the first time, the conditions in the Alabama prisons are being brought to light and the glare of publicity has exposed a horrendous, diabolic and corrupt system. The effect on the citizens of the city of Atmore was that they pressured prison officials to change the name of Atmore Prison in order that it not be identified with the city. Consequently, Atmore Prison has been renamed "Fountain Correctional Institution."